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POLITICS, POLICY AND CRISES

(Reflections prompted by the Schlesinger and Sorenson accounts of the Kennedy Era)

"MISCALCULATION" AND CRISES

John F. Kennedy (as a close White House associate later commented to Dick Neustadt) was a man who came to the Presidency with very few personal, strongly held convictions on policy; and who acquired certain personal commitments, stronger, even, than the public ever realized, out of his experience in office: in particular, a profound commitment against nuclear war and the arms race, and later, a commitment to Civil Rights. But one personal preoccupation in the field of foreign affairs came earlier than these: a strong concern with the risks of war based on "miscalculation," on mutual misunderstandings, failures of foresight and prediction, lack of understanding of an adversary's interests or intentions. In Sorenson's recollection:

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EAY?!" "A favorite Kennedy word from my earliest association with him was 'miscalculation.' Long before he read Barbara Tuchman's The Guns of August -- which he recommended to his staff -- he had as a student at Harvard taken a course on the origins of World War I. It made him realize, he said, 'How quickly countries which were comparatively uninvolved were taken, in the space of a few days, into war.'" (Sorenson, p. 578)

Kennedy's concern with preventing miscalculation led him to propose, in his very first month in ^{April} August (February 11: Sorenson,

p. 609) a private, informal meeting with Khrushchev. Kennedy eventually came to the meeting, in Vienna, fresh from the excruciating discovery, in the Bay of Pigs, of his own ability and that of his bureaucracy to miscalculate. In any case, the theme was one in which he had meant to bring to the discussion, and he returned to it again and again in the talks with Khrushchev. (This appears even more clearly in the Minutes of the Vienna conversations than in the Schlesinger and Sorenson accounts.)

"My ambition," Kennedy said, "is to secure peace." The greatest danger was the miscalculation by one power of the interests and policy of another." (Schlesinger, p. 360)

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"In any event," said the President, "miscalculation simply referred to an erroneous prediction of the other side's next move." It applied equally to all countries. He had made a misjudgment earlier at the Bay of Pigs. Khrushchev had to make many judgments about the West. The whole purpose of their meeting was to introduce more precision into those judgments." (Sorenson, p. 615)

It could not be said that the Vienna Conference, or Kennedy's other efforts to keep open channels of communication, such as the private correspondence with Khrushchev, prevented a plethora of dangerous surprises and miscalculations on both sides. At Vienna, Kennedy failed to persuade Khrushchev that his proposed plan for changing the status quo in Berlin was a "miscalculation." (Indeed, Khrushchev reacted with great irritation whenever Kennedy introduced the notion of "miscalculation." Apparently interpreting it -- or professing to -- as a lightly-veiled

warning to the Soviet that it faced irrevocable U.S. commitments to uphold a status quo agreeable to the West wherever the Soviet Union might choose to encourage or support change: Westerners, Khrushchev said in plaintive exasperation, were much better than Easterners at making this sort of subtle threat in refined ways. Actually, Kennedy took great pains to distinguish between situations in which he believed U.S. of vital interest were involved and those where, in his opinion, they were not; in particular, he went to great -- perhaps, in retrospect, questionable -- lengths to distinguish between Laos and Berlin.) In the ensuing crisis, Kennedy spelled out his concern with miscalculation for the U.S. public and foreign audiences.

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date? "Hitler thought that he could seize Poland, that the British might not fight (or)...after the defeat of Poland, might not continue to fight....In Korea, the North Koreans 'obviously...did not think we were going to come in...we did not think the Chinese were going to come in...as we moved to the north.' Thus 'three times in my lifetime, our country and Europe have been involved in major wars. In each case serious misjudgments were made on both sides of the intentions of others which brought about great devastation. Now, in thermonuclear age, any misjudgment on either side about the intentions of the other could reign more devastation in several hours than has been wrought in all the wars of human history.'" (Sorenson, p. 578)

Within a month or so of this warning, Khrushchev presented the West with the surprises of the Berlin Wall and the reopening of atmospheric nuclear testing; a year later, the high watermark of both miscalculation

and confrontation was achieved in the Cuban crisis. Nor did miscalculation involve only "adversaries;" the Sky Bolt Affair, which brought Anglo-American relations to their lowest point since Suez (a feast of miscalculations on both sides during the preceding Administration) demonstrated how profoundly the closest allies in the West, sharing the closest background of history and institutions, and with the great possible ease of private communication at all levels (the British Ambassador at the time was, by all accounts, Kennedy's closest personal friend and most trusted confidante outside his own family) could misconstrue each other's intentions and responses.

Vietnam, of course, has provided ample instances of miscalculation on both sides before, during, and since Kennedy's Administration: one of the most dramatic instances involving not the Communists but the action of Diem and Nhu in raiding the Buddhist Pagodas, contrary to their assurances and our expectations, in September 1963. FA → FA!

→ COUP: But if these "disappointments" cast doubt on the adequacy of Kennedy's preferred measures for reducing miscalculation -- in particular, maintaining channels of private communication between heads of state -- they could not have underlined more strongly the validity of his early appreciation of the likelihood of major, dangerous miscalculations, and upon the enormous issues at stake. Of these, the most momentous, of course, are the risks of war, of breakdown in alliances, and of major

failures in foreign policies; but some other costs are secondary only by comparison to these. Recurring preoccupation with unforeseen crises, whose urgency and potential importance demanded concentrated presidential attention (particularly in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, with their view of presidential role and responsibility, possibly in some contrast to the Eisenhower Administration) has been a major, costly distraction from the pursuit of positive policies both in foreign affairs and at home. (An analogy has been the preoccupation of the government of Vietnam since 1963 -- and to some extent, since 1960 -- with the possibility of governmental instability based upon unrest in the urban areas or within the military; such "problems" have generally been perceived by American advisors, and to some extent by the GVN itself, as essentially unrelated to and a distraction from the war in the countryside -- the problems of winning support of peasants and of defeating the Communists -- to be treated as on an ad hoc basis and as of somewhat secondary importance, coherent attack upon the causes of such instability. Yet it has been this instability, and the apprehension of it, and the measures to prevent it, that has both weakened the government in its effectiveness in the countryside, and has caused a near-fatal distraction of governmental attention and resources away from the war in the countryside, in effect posing a threat to U.S. /GVN in Vietnam as serious -- and as deserving of high priority, coordinated planning and action, as the activities of the

Communists and the neutrality or hostility of the peasants.) The cost, in terms of resources diverted from The Great Society, of neglect and weakening of relations with allies, and of constraints on our ability to pursue Detente, are more obvious in the case of the escalating Vietnamese war than in the others, yet lost opportunities resulting from presidential preoccupation with crises have been a recurrent problem. Third, the public spectacle of being taken by surprise is not an edifying or helpful one to an administration that aspires to domestic support of its policies, nor to a nation that aspires to leadership of allies and the uncommitted world, let alone to the respectful prudence of adversaries.

For all these reasons, it seems entirely appropriate to accept Kennedy's emphasis upon the need for reducing the incidence of surprise, miscalculation and bad prediction of the behavior and responses of other governments (indeed, it seems as important, ultimately, to improve the understanding and forecasting by other nations of our own behavior and responses, and of each other's).

What are the opportunities for doing this, and the current obstacles? Near-perfect prescience is beyond question impossible: surprises are to be expected, no matter what we do or learn. The phenomena in question are so complex, so interconnected and laced with contingency, in many ways so novel, that a considerable aura of unknowability will always resist our efforts at foresight; moreover, the

the motives and capabilities for secrecy and deception by other nations will often have their effect. High-level decision-makers know both these truths even better than the general public or academicians, and find them comforting, when alleged inadequacies in planning or intelligence, come under attack in the wake of a particularly humiliating public display of surprise and unpreparedness: "Some you win and some you lose" is the formula with which responsible officials privately ward off feelings of panic and guilt (and demands that the system needs changing) after these disasters. And the slogan has some basis in reality; but is it in fact true that our enormous national decision-making apparatus does an adequate, acceptable job -- as effectively as can reasonably be expected or achieved -- in education, alerting, informing and forewarning the President on the problems to be expected in the international sphere and on foreign responses to alternative U.S. policies and actions? The fact is that a close look at the fine grain of governmental decision-making, based upon good access to data on internal planning, forecasting and decision-making in the national security field, is far from reassuring on this point. This is especially true when one examines the instances of crisis and surprise that admittedly raise a presumption of failure of foresight, planning and policy; yet the inadequacies in high-level understanding and in governmental decision-making machinery that show up most clearly in these cases can, on a second look, be seen to

characterize our policymaking in many areas that did not, or have not yet, produced a dramatic crisis.

POLITICS, BUREAUCRACY AND PREDICTION

I wish to discuss, as a major factor in miscalculation and surprise, crisis and failure, an area of what seems to me to be remediable ignorance: ignorance, which is to say, that is ultimately (in view of its costs) culpable and inexcusable: specifically, ignorance of the impact of (a) the domestic politics and (b) bureaucratic functioning and rivalry upon the foreign policies and security policies of other nations, and upon their responses to our own policies and actions.

These several forms of ignorance are all reflected in a tendency to think about -- talk about, speculate about, analyze and make predictions about -- foreign governments, nations, even co-alliances, precisely as if their behavior resulted from the conscious decision of a single person. This does not necessarily mean that the goals, choices and personality of the given government or nation are identified with those of a specific, living person: although, in some cases -- Khrushchev, DeGaulle, Mao -- there has been a close approach to do doing just that. What it does mean is that the thinking ignores structure, process, conflict and dynamic balance within the foreign "system" in question. Even when a conscious distinction is maintained between the "government" and the people of the nation, analysis tends to focus almost entirely upon the decisions

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and behavior of the "government" and in turn to reason as if the government itself were in monolithic block -- a "person" -- with no bureaucratic structure, controversy or rivalry, and as if the bureaucratic system had no need to take into account political relationships with extra governmental forces and groups within the nation, at least so far as decisions on national security and foreign policy were concerned.

Moreover, the tendency is to imagine that the goals that guide these matters of "external" policy are, in their respective cases, "governmental," "national," or "alliance" goals, i.e., "external" goals untainted by considerations of bureaucratic rivalry or politics internal to the unit in question. (A third tendency -- which is, however, somewhat more narrowly restricted to RAND-type analyses than to thinking within the government -- is to analyze the behavior of foreign governments as if it resulted from the economists' model of rational, deliberate decision-making, including the conscious comparison of well-defined alternatives and explicit, coherent set of goals: a very considerable idealization, or distortion, even of the behavior of a real human individual -- as any psychoanalyst or indeed any behavioral scientist would quickly point out -- let alone a realistic conceptual basis for analyzing the policies of an organization, governmental bureaucracy, nation or alliance.) I will not go into here the general limitations and risks such an approach to the analysis and understanding of the behavior and complex social/organizational/

political systems. I merely assert that it is a potent source of error, "miscalculation," and potential surprise.

The practice of personifying "the opponent" (for instance, "the Soviet Union" or "the Sino-Soviet Bloc") has its roots in part in a natural desire to simplify the environment conceptually, for purposes in analyzing, understanding and controlling it. But in this case, I believe, it reflects at least as much simple ignorance of and lack of attention to (a combination that might be called "unconscious ignorance") the internal phenomena that it ignores and their relevance to the policies being analyzed. In turn, the conceptual simplification reinforces and preserves a comparative study of the internal decision-making that preceded unforeseen crises reveals in many cases -- either in the U.S. or in other parties to the conflict -- a failure ever to ask what the impact of one's own national policies might be upon the internal structure and process, bureaucratic and political of various other nations: in particular, the impact as seen by the national leadership of these nations, in terms of the effects upon their support, their political risks and vulnerabilities, their influence upon bureaucratic and domestic political factions, their opportunities and constraints.

Yet, if we did ask this question, more frequently, we would not often get good answers. The ability of our governmental agencies, and even our extra governmental institutions, to provide the President

with adequate answers, if he should begin to ask these questions, is severely limited: (1) Ignorance of the current specifics of the internal politics of other nations (maintained, within our governmental machinery, by inadequacies of organization, guidance and expertise within our overseas Missions, including the Political Sections manned by FSO's, CAS, and our Washington-based intelligence agencies, in which respect to collecting and interpreting such data on foreign internal politics and bureaucratic controversy); (2) lack of an adequate general understanding of what politics is, how politicians -- who may be heads of states -- reach decisions, and how politics affect national policy. What is the influence upon national policy and national executive decision-making of the organization and process of politics within the nation, the origins of the Administration and the procedures for succession in office, the sources of governmental power and the nature of political opposition? What is the character of the national leadership; if there is a class of "politicians," what is their background and orientation towards their role; what is the influence of a legislature, if any, and political parties, upon policy?

Ignorance of the specifics of the domestic politics or the relationship of politics to policy in other nations is not limited, by any means, to the United States. Nor do these uncertainties apply only